DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 493 SO 019 601

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TITLE Possibilities of Cooperation with Eastern Europe.
PUB DATE 16 May 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Forum on Education and International Competence (St. Louis, MO, May 13-16, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Exchange Programs; *Foreign Countries; Global Approach; *International Cooperation; *International Educational Exchange; Study Abroad
IDENTIFIERS *Europe (East); *Hungary

ABSTRACT

This paper presents possible methods of cooperation in the area of U.S. educational exchange with Hungary and other Eastern Bloc countries. Specific problems are featured, and information is provided about legal, political, and economic issues and concerns. The paper stresses the need to stop thinking of these countries as politically homogeneous and to learn that socialist countries are becoming politically diverse. Openness in educational exchanges varies from country to country, but Hungary is a leader in international educational projects. Specific financial problems facing the exchanges include the lack of funds, currency regulations, and money exchange rates. New program rationales between Hungary and the United States include an increase in Hungarian student interest and the need for students from both countries to experience a global education. Possible areas of cooperation between the two countries are: (1) undertaking joint research for coordinating existing projects, initiating new programs, and mutual planning assistance; (2) planning student exchange programs through government grants and financial support and between specific schools and providing for exchanges of resource materials; and (3) financing exchanges for specific students and teachers, establishing special foundations, and sponsoring joint exchange ventures. (JHP)

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POSSIBILITIES OF COOPERATION WITH EASTERN EUROPE

by

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Paper presented at the American Forum on Education and
International Competence
St. Louis, Missouri
May 13-16, 1988

SO 019 621

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Attila Horvath, Ph.D.

Possibilities of Cooperation with Eastern Europe

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In this presentation I will give an outline of possible ways of cooperation with the, so called, East Bloc countries in general and particularly with Hungary on the field of educational exchanges. I will attempt to circumsribe the difficulties when starting such an enterprise and also give information on the legal, political and economical environment.

First of all it is needed to clarify that in any effort to develop ties with institutions in East Europe one has to give up the 'Bloc' thinking. The East Bloc has hardly ever been really bloc-like and this is especially true in recent times. No one can seriously count the DDR and Poland as members of a politically homogenous group, neither is it possible to say that there are no significant differences between the economies of, say the USSR and Hungary. Romania has been reluctant to follow the bloc's foreign policy for a long time. The events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia and those of in Poland in 1980 were probing this unity as well. And just in these days Hungary's relationship with Warsaw Pact member Romania is much worse in every respect than with capitalist Austria. These few words on differences are very important to remember - national diversity of policies among the socialist countries are becoming more and more apparent. Eastern Europe, in the Western use of the expression, covers a number of countries with significant dissimilarities in their culture, language, historic[illegible]ckground and recent political-economical systems.

Disregard to this multiformity may result in embarrasing and discouraging fiasco in building relationships.

Parallel to the general policies of socialist countries their openness varies in education as well. According to my limited experiences the least chance to find willingness for international cooperation are in Romania and the DDR. One may have better results in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia and certainly there is considerably more interest for foreign relations in Poland and lately in the USSR. But still it can be said without nationalistic bias that Hungary is well ahead of its allies in international projects for there are no theoretical or practical obstacles for higher level or school to school cooperation and exchanges. While in many socialist countries individuals or schools need the approval of one or another authority for building foreign relations, in Hungary such ventures are within the range of responsibility of principals. On the other hand, while possibilities are 'limitless' there are very few actual exchanges or joint projects existing in Hungary. The reason for this lies in the very restrictive policy of the past and consequently the lack of facilities which provide information and professional help for schools in need of cooperation with educational institutions in the West.

Besides the political difficulties in some countries and the still haunting ideological suspicions even on local levels, there is another underlying issue which is responsible for the relative lack of contacts. That is the financial aspect of cooperation. The lack of funds is just one dimension of this many sided problem although it has paramount importance. Socialist countries share the system of financing education in a redistributory way. This means that schools receive their budget from state/miniterial

sources allocated every year to local authorities. Schools have no other sources and are not allowed to use their budget freely. Certain amounts are allocated for certain purposes (salaries, maintenance, equipment etc.) and amounts cannot be used for other purposes. This financing system impedes extracurricular activities or the enrichment of school programs. It did not cause any serious disfunction until school programs were compulsorily uniform but since last year's Educational Act in Hungary schools are encouraged to develop their own program. This new tendency and more freedom to schools together with the still rigid financing system frustrates schools more and more.

Another financial problem which poses serious obstacles to the exchange of either information or personnel with the West and which hits every socialist country is the prevailing system of currency regulations and exchange rates. The difference between Western and Eastern, the 'hard' and 'soft' currencies means that while Westeners can change as much of their money to local currencies in the East, this is not the case with Easteners visiting the West. Travellers from socialist countries can buy only limited amount of hard currency when leaving the country. (Travel regulations vary widely among East European countries from complete bans of travel to practically complete freedom to go.) Banking transactions to the West are practically not possible for schools, so they cannot order materials from abroad or pay for their students to travel. And even if it is possible to travel the exchange rate is so infavorable for those from socialist countries that such a trip is a heavy burden on the families. It can be stated that in many cases it is finances that hinders cooperation and exchanges and not political or ideological reasons. This is certainly true in Hungary's case. The situation

could be characterized much better by analysing North-South relationships than with the obsolete Iron Curtain theory. Therefore I would suggest to change the name of the problem from 'East-West' to 'South-East--North-West'

Before giving some new rationales for exchange programs between the US and Hungary, let me give some facts on the cultural relationship of a Western superpower and a Central European small nation. These figures may explain why most East Europeans know more about North America than Americans about the socialist countries. Direct comparisons are, of course, misleading but facts on cultural exchanges, publications, TV programs are telling about trends. And while the free float of information occupies a central role in US foreign policy, its cultural policy seems to go in another direction.

Statistics show that although there are no contracts between the Hungarian TV and any US companies (talks have just started with NBC and CBS) Hungarian TV showed 809 American programs between 1980 and 1986. Hungarian programs appeared in the States in 1986 the first time, they numbered 10. During the same period 27 to 35 American films were shown in Hungarian cinemas yearly, while 1-4 Hungarian movies made it to US theatres. In Hungary about 50 American fictions are published every year and in addition 20-50 scienctific titles are translated per annum. In the vast American market there was not one year in the last four decades when more than three Hungarian fictions were published but there were five years when only one volume and many when not even one work by Hungarian author left the printer. More Hungarians seem to be eager to study or work in the US every year. Every year there are about 500 Hungarians visiting the States for a longer period (averaging 7 months). On the other side we have the

Americans, about 80 to 100 coming to Hungary in every year for considerably shorter period.

But why should Americans engage in costly exchanges with a country which is so different in every respect, which is less developed, which has no promising economic potentials or big markets for the US? Besides the obvious, that is, we are heading towards creating the global village not only informationwise but also in economy, there are several aspects of North American life and thinking which can be understood better only if seen from a foreign perspective. Everyday trivialities gain special importance in another culture where they are not taken for granted. Thinking globally and acting locally is only possible with global experience at hand. Experiencing the world teaches lessons of tolerance which is very much needed for the strong and the big. Basic values of American culture, like freedom, get a new and rich meaning by learning more about other nations and cultures. Western students visiting East European countries like Hungary must face the question of what freedom means, just how far their tolerance of political views could be stretched. My experience is that many of them leave my country perplexed with the puzzle of what is to be done in this region. Most Westerners arrive with the conviction that we, Hungarians should be liberated or at least democracy or capitalism introduced would turn East Europe into a group of thriving countries. Those who see and who understand will leave with open questions and with less ready-made stereotype answers. What I think why it is useful for Americans to visit, say Hungary, is paradoxical: I think they can understand the US better while appreciating freedom of other people just as well. The most you could get out of such a trip is to be less confident in judgeing other countries, a little bit

less sure in your answers and have a closer look at the questions.

Until now I focussed on exchanges which I consider to be the most important in international education but it is just one aspect of possible cooperation. In my proposal for joint enterprises I include research as well. The following table summarizes the points I will develop through the next few pages.

Possible Fields of Cooperation in Hungary

- Joint research
  - * coordination of existing projects
  - * starting new programs
  - * 'serving' each other
- Exchange programs
  - * on gvmt level
  - * school-to-school
  - * exchange of materials
- Financing
  - * private individuals (students & teachers)
  - * foundations
  - * sponsorship of joint ventures

On the educational research field there are very few examples of cooperation. Having a centralized educational system which is achieving well in IEA comparative surveys in mathematics and sciences, Hungary's educational system could be interesting to be studied for US researchers. Centralized systems are not well understood in anglo countries for they cannot be comprehended within the theoretical framework of decentralized educational systems. Understanding the successes and failures of a highly

bureaucratized structure would yield in knowing more about the traits of a decentralized schooling system. In Hungary the National Institute of Education (OPI) is open towards cooperation on countless fields.

Starting new projects seems to be a promising idea but within the recent economic recession, which hits education the most, finding resouces is extremely difficult. But not impossible as, for example, a joint research with Dutch, British and Hungarian participants in comparative textbook analysis shows (with the support of the European Cultural Foundation). Hungarian and foreign foundations seem to be willing to support East-West researches.

The real possibilities lay in what I call 'serving each other' which means barter trade in educational area. We seem to have different potentials and similar needs on the East and the West. Americans need to know about the variety of cultures in Europe (both East and West), in short, information and experience. We, in Hungary, also need information and experience. The problem, as I have already pointed out, is mainly financial for us. While all interested American researchers could afford to visit Hungary or even more to order materials, the problem they are facing is the language. And this is true for all the East European countries. The number of materials available in English is ridiculously low and definitely insufficient for any research of scientific quality. Therefore, the task for joint enterprises is to bring together interested parties who are willing to pay for the services of East European institutions and, on the other side, which have the expertise for providing such information in English. The hard currency so gained by East European institutions would be spent in the West anyway, it could cover

travel costs, pay for registration fees at conferences or would broaden the scope of literature available for scientists in the East.

As to the possible exchange programs there are two levels of cooperation. One is on governmental level, which seems to work well. In the States USIA is responsible for filling the quota for Hungary while in our country it is the Ministry of Education that offers travel grants to Hungarians. The range of these grants is, however, rather narrow; professionals, university professors or, in the best case, university or college students qualify for the requirements. One cannot overestimate the importance of these relationships but it is also true that, so far, very little has been done for exchanges on lower levels. Secondary school students and teachers are such a potential. Interestingly enough foundations, ministries and other bureaus do not lyke to invest in high school exchanges because they consider such trips as to be of less academic value than those of university students. To a certain extent this is understandable but the purpose of school-to-school exchanges is different from study grants. High school exchanges are not focussing on this or that subject (and they should not) but offer the possibility of gaining experiences about other cultures at an age when values are subject to change and teachers have better chances in the development of cultural understanding. The problem is that many of these high school exchanges take the form of Summer vacation. If properly prepared and professionally devised they should be more than pleasure trips. Preparation in this case means not only the careful planning of programs and providing the best first hand information available but also the processing of information. International experience is not valuable in itself. Information gets its value

content when properly incorporated in the existing set of knowledge. Overcoming prejudices, continously correcting our stereotypes about nations, groups of people, political systems etc., can be achieved only through acquiring the necessary information and processing the experiences on personal, emotional and cognitive level as well. I do not wish to go into technical details of just how this procedure should be designed but I am certainly willing to share my experiences on this field if anyone interested.

The financing of international enterprises in education seems to be the Achilles heel of any innovative effort. In many cases it is private individuals who cover costs; like in this case when I received no support for my attendace at this conference. A Canadian-Hungarian student exchange program that I organized this year faced serious financial troubles. The Hungarian school received some generous help from the Hungarian Bus Export Company in hosting the Canadian students but parents will have to pay the airfare for their children when it is their turn to visit North America. This is, knowing the differences in incomes, is incredible burden. Interestingly enough, while Canadian had difficulties in finding students for this exchange, in Hungary applicants numbered three times more than our quota.

The problem of financing could not be solved by foundation grants even if they were willing to support student exchanges on high school level. Occasional financial assistance is nice but the basis of school-to-school exchanges should be steady and must provide continuity. One single foundation, due their general policy, cannot and is not willing to take the responsibility for such continuity. The possible solution is twofold: a special separate foundation of different foundations might give assistance

or I can imagine the support of joint Hungarian-American business ventures.

Setting up a "Foundation of Foundations" would incorporate small sums given by foundations interested in the development of East-West relationships. There could be several of these little 'foundations' allocated in schools which engage in exchanges and it could be entirely up to the decision of the participating foundations for how long they offer their support. They have to understand, however, that experience and time is needed to bring exchange programs to their full potential. This also implies that professional guidance or advise must be provided.

Another possibility is using (local) business for the source of exchange projects. It is not easy to convince business people about the necessity and the profits of high school exchange programs and this is true for both East and West. 'Begging' around might be successful once or twice but it hardly gives the feeling of profit making to either the beggar or the benevolent donor. Psychologically such donations give the impression that exchanges (in this case) are not investments but rather belong to consumption. Bringing up intelligent new generation are not on the agenda of any company's board meeting let it be capitalist or socialist. All this leads us to realize that in many cases one has to look for solutions which are attractive to all participants, in this case to schools and to business. I would, therefore, encourage the use of the support of joint business ventures. In our case this means that American-Hungarian joint ventures could be initiated even on local levels by school boards or schools. Local bodies could ask the help of the local business community to help developing East-West relationships by not giving out money for support of American students (this would leave

Hungarians, who are in need, without funds thus exchange cannot be realized) but to invest capital in Hungarian business and support schools from the profit. Naturally, business people must have the opportunity to invest in the field they think to bring the best profit. The advantages of exchanges based on joint enterprises are manyfold. First, invested money is working capital, second, it gives schools and students the feeling of enjoying the immediate result of improving East-West relationships and third, it may result in profits for the local business community. The programs could be made self-supporting while offering the opportunity of first hand information on the special nature of making business abroad.

As a final word I would like to offer the help of our Institute to any interested institutions in the States and elsewhere in finding the most beneficial type of cooperation. I am convinced that this conference stimulates interest in internationalizing education through the world and only hope that this internalization will include the beter knowledge of Eastern Europe as well.

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